

An Attempt to Reduce Students' Language Anxiety in Foreign Language Classrooms

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1. Introduction

It has been long said that language learning should be communicative activity in which learners would actively engage in communication in target language (TL). Even in Japan, where grammar-translation method had been widely used in teaching English at school, communicative method is now flourishing as an ideal way of English teaching. However, “communicative” language teaching requires two parties actively get involved in classroom activities; both teachers and students. As an instructor of English in several universities in Japan, the researcher sometimes finds it difficult to make students speak in English, especially in front of the whole class. Even though students can engage pair-work activities in English, a majority of them are hesitant to speak their opinion in English in front of the class. Part of the reason for this hesitation could be Japanese people's so-called shy and reserved personality, but language anxiety, a type of anxiety specific to foreign language learning, may also be one of the factors which hinder students' active involvement in classroom discussion. If so, it is a duty of the instructor to reduce students' anxiety to make them speak TL more comfortably. Therefore, the present study examines the effect of a TL speaking activity which teachers can utilize to reduce students' language anxiety in foreign language classrooms.

2. Literature Review

As Krashen (1985) argues, learners' affective filter should be kept low for effective language learning. In other words, learners should relax and be free from worry or anxiety when learning foreign languages. Language anxiety is defined as “the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language” (Young, 1999, p. 27). High level of anxiety has proven to have negative impact on language achievement (Horwitz, 2001). However, in reality, classroom atmosphere is not always friendly or relaxing enough to keep learners' affective filter low, and learners sometimes feel pressure or anxiety, especially during oral activities (Apple, 2013; Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope; 1986; MacIntyre, 1999; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Phillips,

1999). Young (1999) suggests that learners' frustrations and anxieties could be due to "unengaging language activities, ineffective language instructions, and weak ... material" (p. 6). While teachers should strive to minimize learners' anxiety, some of them unfortunately remain insensitive to such anxiety (Trang, Baldauf & Moni, 2013).

Araki (2010) examines the relationship between affect and communicative competence of Japanese learners of English, and concludes that there are significant correlations between the two, saying anxiety hinders language learning. She points out that the general introverted personality of Japanese people leads Japanese learners more anxious and less confident in using English, making them less comfortable in public speaking, which hampers improvement of their communication skills of English.

Considering these facts about language anxiety of foreign language learners, one of the priorities for language teachers should be to provide assistance to reduce learners' anxiety in foreign language classrooms. Isoda (2009) suggests an activity to help lower learners' unwillingness to speak TL. In his study, 103 Japanese university students engaged in activities called SPM (sentence per minute), originally developed by Soresi (2005), in which students talked about the given theme for 30 seconds while their partners counting the number of sentences the speaker produced. Four weeks of this exercise contributed to the reduction of students' unwillingness to speak English as well as their language anxiety. This clear improvement of students' affective state in such a short period of time suggests that the activity should be considered of great value in reducing learners' anxiety. The present study aims to implement a similar activity with SPM to help learners be more comfortable in speaking TL.

3. Study

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were the first year students majoring in foreign languages in a middle-sized national university located in Tokyo. They enrolled in mandatory English classes taught by the researcher during the spring semester in 2015. All students had taken the TOEIC test as a placement test upon enrolling in the university. Although their TOEIC score (650-780) suggests that they are in fact advanced learners of English, majority of students were somehow reluctant to speak English in classroom; many of them were not eager to state their opinion in English when asked by the instructor. Two classes of students, who were majoring various languages, participated in the study. No student was majoring in English. The data of 39 students who completed two sets of questionnaire conducted in April and July was used.

3.2. Procedure

3.2.1. Questionnaire

The questionnaire to evaluate language anxiety of Japanese learners of English devel-

Table 1

Questions Presented in Questionnaire

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1. I feel nervous when I speak in English with other students.
 2. I do not want to speak in English unless it is necessary.
 3. I do not think I can make myself understood in English.
 4. I would like to avoid speaking in English.
 5. I do not think I can speak in English considering my English competence.
 6. I am relaxed when I speak in English.
 7. When I need to speak in English, I want to minimize my talk.
 8. I do not think I can convey my idea in English to my partner.
 9. I am worried that other students find my English not good.
 10. I am worried that other students laugh at my poor English.
 11. I become anxious when I hear other students' good pronunciation.
 12. I am concerned whether my pronunciation and intonation are appropriate.
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oped by Kondo and Ying-Ling (2003) and Isoda (2009) were combined and modified by the researcher to be implemented in this study (Table1). The questionnaire consists of twelve questions of a six-point Likert scale of from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree) written in Japanese (the original Japanese version is presented in Appendix). Students were asked to answer the questionnaire at the beginning of the semester (in April) and at the end of the semester (in July). All statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS 11.0.

3.2.2. Activity

During four months period of the semester, the English classes were held once in a week on Friday afternoon, 15 times. At the beginning of each class, the students were to participate in a 5-minutes activity designed to reduce their language anxiety. The details of the activity are as follows.

- 1) Two students (student A and student B) are paired up.
- 2) The instructor presents the topic of the day. The topic is simple and easy to talk about for students. For example, talk about your last weekend, the gift you received recently, the memorable trip, one of your family members.
- 3) Student A talks about the topic for two minutes. Student B is supposed to take notes and asks questions if student A stops talking before the time is up.
- 4) Student B talks about the topic for two minutes. Student A now does what student B previously did.
- 5) Both student A and B write about what their partner has said in English for 2 minutes.
- 6) The instructor collects students' writing.
- 7) A week later, in the following class, the instructor gives the writing back to the students with some feedback.

4. Results

The answers from the two sets of questionnaires, conducted in April and July, were examined (Table 2). The result shows that there is significant difference in students' anxiety for some of the questions.

5. Discussion

The results demonstrate that the activity had contributed to lowering some of the languages anxiety that students had. In general, students became more relaxed, more confident, and less concerned about the eyes of their peers in speaking in English after experiencing 15 weeks of the activities. The activity seems to be especially useful in reducing fear of the negative evaluation from other students, since the result of question 9-12, which deal negative judgement from peers', show significant decrease in

Table 2

The Result of the Questionnaire

Question	April (N=39)		July (N=39)		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>		
1. I feel nervous when I speak in English with other students.	4.36	1.16	3.69	1.19	3.47	.001**
2. I do not want to speak in English unless it is necessary.	2.74	1.25	2.54	1.29	.93	.359
3. I do not think I can make myself understood in English.	3.26	1.02	3.26	.82	.00	1.000
4. I would like to avoid speaking in English.	2.38	1.14	2.49	1.07	.60	.553
5. I do not think I can speak in English considering my English competence.	3.36	1.14	2.95	1.15	2.08	.044**
6. I am relaxed when I speak in English.	2.38	1.04	2.87	1.08	2.93	.006**
7. When I need to speak in English, I want to minimize my talk.	2.69	1.15	2.79	1.13	.59	.553
8. I do not think I can convey my idea in English to my partner.	2.97	1.06	2.85	.84	.78	.442
9. I am worried that other students find my English not good.	3.97	1.39	3.26	1.27	4.38	.000**
10. I am worried that other students laugh at my poor English.	3.67	1.42	2.69	1.17	5.06	.000**
11. I become anxious when I hear other students' good pronunciation.	4.23	1.49	3.67	1.58	3.22	.003**
12. I am concerned if my pronunciation and intonation are appropriate.	4.56	1.27	3.77	1.22	5.22	.000**

anxiety after the treatment. By engaging simple and relaxing speaking tasks every week, students came to be less fearful of others who hear them speak. As the results of the question 1 (I feel nervous when I speak in English with other students) and 6 (I am relaxed when I speak in English) show, students also came to feel less nervous and more comfortable about speaking in English with other students, which led them to have more confidence in their competence of speaking ability as is shown in the result of the question 5 (I do not think I can speak in English considering my English competence).

Given the simplicity of the task, it is surprising that students' affective state has improved so dramatically. Several factors seem to contribute this improvement. First of all, the activity is very simple and short. The theme of the talk is designed to be "everyday topic" so that students can use basic vocabulary they are familiar with. Students talk about their family members, possession, or the things they experienced, only for two minutes. Since it is a pair activity, there is only one listener, which also helps them reduce their anxiety. In a relaxing atmosphere with only one devoted audience, the speaker does not feel so much pressure to produce English. By repeating such short and simple tasks for weeks, students gradually get used to speaking English, thus become less fearful and more confident and comfortable in speaking English. Since the partners are periodically changed, students have ample opportunities to get to know other classmates, which might lead to friendly classroom atmosphere and eventually contributes to reducing students' anxiety.

However, the result of the study indicates that the activity fails to reduce some types of anxiety. As is shown in the result of the question 2 (I do not want to speak in English unless it is necessary), 4 (I would like to avoid speaking in English) and 7 (When I need to speak in English, I want to minimize my talk), the tendency for avoidance does not significantly lowered. This suggests that even though students have lower anxiety, they still would like to avoid speaking TL if possible, or minimize their talk.

As for students' confidence in their speaking competence, the result is somewhat ambiguous. Even though the result of the question 5 (I do not think I can speak in English considering my English competence) shows significant improvement, those of the question 3 (I do not think I can make myself understood in English) and 8 (I do not think I can convey my idea in English to my partner) do not improve significantly. Probably it requires more time and effort to nourish strong self-confidence.

Nonetheless, the activity implemented in this study is worth trying since it helps students become less anxious and more comfortable in communicating in TL. Even though the task itself is very short and simple, engaging such an easy and relaxing task every week surely helps students build resilience to the fear of public speaking. In fact, by the end of the semester, students became to speak up more in front of the whole class when asked their opinion by the instructor. Due to such engaging attitude of stu-

dents the class had become more “communicative.”

6. Limitation of the Study

The weakness of the present study is that it lacks a control group. The reduced anxiety among students might simply due to the time they spent in class. They had also engaged in other speaking activities such as group discussion and classroom discussion in class, which might have contributed to reducing their anxiety, too. Since the present study lacks the control group, the factor that contributes in reducing students' anxiety cannot be singled out to the activity used in the experiment. That is the major weakness of the study.

Another weakness is the size of participants. Only 39 students have participated in the experiment, which cannot be considered large enough to develop any solid conclusion. Further empirical study with a control group and larger participants should be conducted to clarify how teachers can reduce learners' language anxiety.

7. Conclusion

This study attempts to reduce learners' language anxiety by implementing simple and easy TL speaking activity in foreign language classrooms. The results of this study show that such activity can help reduce some of learners' language anxiety significantly. The implication of the study is that teachers should pay more attention to students' affective state in language classrooms, and try to play more active role in reducing learners' anxiety by implementing various tasks and activities designed to make learners relaxed, since learners can learn TL more efficiently when they are free from the burden of anxiety. While Japanese learners of English are generally shy of speaking English, they do enjoy simple tasks such as the one conducted in this study. One participant wrote a following comment at the end of the semester: “Even though I felt nervous speaking in English, I quite enjoyed the task at the beginning of the class every week.” Such an experience of enjoying speaking TL would surely make them try speaking TL more in the future, reducing their language anxiety, and in a long run, making them more competent speakers of TL.

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Appendix

授業中に使用する英語に関するアンケート

本学では、英語の授業は基本的には英語で行っていますが、授業中の英語の使用に関して学生の皆さんの率直な意見を伺いたく、アンケートへのご協力をお願いいたします。なお、お答えいただいたアンケートは、授業の質の向上に役立てるほか、英語教育の質の向上を目的とする研究に使用する場合もありますが、どうぞご了承ください。

授業中に自分が英語で話すことに関して、あなたはどのように思いますか？当てはまるところを○で囲んでください。

		全く当てはまらない	あまり当てはまらない	どちらかと言うと当てはまらない	どちらかと言うと当てはまる	だいたい当てはまる	よく当てはまる
1	他の学生と英語で話す時、緊張する	1	2	3	4	5	6
2	できれば英語では話したくない	1	2	3	4	5	6
3	自分が話す英語は、相手に意味が伝わらないと思う	1	2	3	4	5	6
4	英語で話すことは避けたい	1	2	3	4	5	6
5	今の自分の英語力では、英語で話すことはできないと思う	1	2	3	4	5	6
6	英語で話す時、リラックスしている	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	英語で話さなければならない時は、できるだけしゃべらないようにしていきたい	1	2	3	4	5	6
8	自分が英語で話しても、自分の考えを相手に伝えることはできないと思う	1	2	3	4	5	6
9	他の学生から自分の英語を下手だと思われぬか心配だ	1	2	3	4	5	6
10	自分の英語が他の学生に笑われぬか心配だ	1	2	3	4	5	6
11	他の学生の上手な発音を聞くとあせる	1	2	3	4	5	6
12	英語を話す時、自分の発音やイントネーションが適切なものか、心配だ	1	2	3	4	5	6

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—Abstract—

Language anxiety, defined as negative state of mind specific to language learning, has been said to be a strong factor that hinders effective learning. Many researchers and educators have argued the importance of reducing learners' anxiety to facilitate their learning, and advised teachers to take measures to reduce learners' language anxiety. The present study aims to help students reduce their language anxiety by organizing simple and easy target language (TL) speaking activity. A group of university students partake in the activity designed to reduce their language anxiety, and their change of language anxiety is examined. The results of the study suggest that the activity is effective to reduce some of students' language anxiety.